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TAGS: [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT ISLAMIC CREDENTIALS UNDER ATTACK

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: A series of allegations and rumors that the GOT is violating basic Islamic principles have spread throughout Tunisia this spring, forcing the government to take aggressive action to prove its Islamic bona fides. In June, a human rights group alleged that prison officials had desecrated the Quran while torturing a prisoner. While the GOT issued an unusual public and local denial of this allegation, Tunisians are increasingly discussing the role of Islam in the state, given reports of veiled women being prevented from entering universities and a false rumor that identification cards will be required to enter mosques. Senior GOT officials have actively defended the state's Muslim credentials, but are privately worried about the potential for an Islamist revival. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) DESECRATION OF THE QURAN: On June 1, the Bizerte branch of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) issued a statement alleging prison officials had tortured a prisoner and desecrated the Quran on May 4. In reports to his family, who informed the LTDH, the prisoner alleged that officials beat him with the Quran before throwing it on the floor and kicking it. On June 3, the GOT arrested LTDH Bizerte President Ali Ben Salem and three other members. According to an official GOT statement, following an investigation, Ben Salem was charged with publishing false information. LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi told Poloff that the GOT response indicated regime weakness and disorganization, as "any normal state" would have launched an investigation into the individual named, rather than investigating the LTDH. Trifi reported that the GOT had removed and interrogated the official involved, however, instead of announcing the results of the inquiry, GOT officials and loyal journalists chose to denounce Ben Salem for spreading false rumors.

13. (C) HIJAB DISCRIMINATION: In late May, local journalists reported that veiled university students were prevented from taking their annual exams and had their student identity cards seized. During a visit to a Tunis campus, PolFSN witnessed veiled students grouped outside the gates of the institute, apparently unable to enter. While cases of individual harassment or pressure not to wear the veil are often reported in Tunisia, this appears to be the first case of widespread application of such a policy across university and college campuses. These reports have caused some Tunisians to surmise that the GOT may be moving toward reinstating the 1981 circular that forbids the wearing of "sectarian dress" in public institutions. While there is no evidence that this official policy is being enforced, President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Religious Affairs Minister Boubaker El Akhzouri have both asserted in the past

year that the "hijab" is foreign dress.

¶4. (C) MOSQUE ID CARDS: Additionally, a rumor about GOT efforts to control access to mosques by requiring citizens to acquire mosque identification cards has also been recirculated. This story, which surfaced on the Internet nearly a year ago, includes an inaccurate report that the Minister of Interior Hedi M'henni -- a former Minister who is now the ruling RCD party Secretary General -- announced the ID cards would be a means of "rationalizing prayer". While several GOT officials, including M'henni and Presidential Advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, have dismissed these rumors, their continued circulation indicate Tunisians can imagine the state taking such action, even if there are no reports of individuals being unable to access mosques without the "official" ID cards.

¶5. (S) GOT CONCERNS: While the GOT continues to deny these rumors and other allegations that suggest Tunisia is not a truly Muslim state, the fear of Islamist populism has spurred additional action. An embassy contact reported in May that the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party had convened a meeting of GOT-loyal and quasi-independent civil society entities (including labor, business, women's and children's entities) to discuss how to combat the increasing numbers of women wearing the veil. While the contact did not share the outcome of the meeting, he said the GOT increasingly feared that religious conservatives could be infiltrating GOT educational, social and health entities. Given the historical role of these institutions as greenhouses for political leadership, the GOT is increasingly concerned that Islamists could gain influence throughout the government and society.

¶6. (S) COMMENT: All of this comes as Tunisia's banned Islamic party an-Nahdha marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding on June 6. During an interview with al-Jazeera broadcast on June 10, exiled an-Nahdha leader Rached Ghannouchi said that "every Muslim wants Islam to rule." While the pre-recorded interview did not discuss recent events in Tunisia, the tension between the GOT and the devout segment of the Tunisian public provides a potential impetus for Islamist political action. To date, the GOT response has focused on reaffirming Tunisia's religious heritage, with which most Tunisians are satisfied. The current popularity of Islamist activism remains limited due to the GOT's active political and security stance. However, if allegations of corruption were to become as widespread as allegations of anti-Islamic behavior, the combination of the two could become a true threat to the regime. END COMMENT.

HUDSON